

My name is Amy Turner-Thole, and I am a resident of Grand Rapids, Michigan (Kent County). I am writing to testify in support of Bill 42-21 on the Early Care and Education Coordinating Entity.

I have been heavily involved with First Steps Kent, the ECE coordinating entity in Kent County, since its inception in 2009 and helped develop the framework to create the independent 501(c)3 non-profit. First Steps Kent is a public-private partnership that provides structure, oversight, and accountability for a coordinated system of policies, programs, and services that support and empower families with young children in our community. The work of First Steps Kent involves:

- Convening stakeholders to focus and align collective work and resources.
- Using data to measure collective progress; identify the community's most pressing needs; and ensure that services and programs advance racial equity.
- Building public will for investing in young children and advocating for policies that support children and families.
- Bringing resources to the community to support the health, development, and school readiness of young children.

I began working with Montgomery Moving Forward (MMF) in September 2020, after a nationwide review of effective ECE coordinating entities identified First Steps Kent as the model most aligned with the priorities for Montgomery County. I served as a consultant to MMF's ECE Coordinating Entity project, sharing the perspective and lessons learned from Kent County and helping apply them to the unique needs of Montgomery County. I worked with MMF staff and volunteer leadership to develop the report and recommendations presented to the Montgomery County Council in January 2021.

At the start of my consultancy, it was immediately evident that MMF had done extensive research into the challenges and barriers faced by both families and providers in Montgomery County, as well as best practices to address those challenges systemically and long term. Throughout the process, a diverse collaborative of stakeholders expressed unwavering commitment to the following criteria that are included in the final legislation:

- Buy-in, leadership, and financial commitment from both the public and private sectors.
- Meaningful engagement of parents and families that provides them with decision-making authority and ensures their authentic voice shapes the work of the entity.
- Development of actionable and measurable goals to advance equity and alignment with Montgomery County's racial equity and social justice strategic plan.
- Independence and neutrality so that the entity is guided only by what is best for children, families, and the community, not what benefits any individual organization.
- A 360-degree view of the ECE system so that decisions are made using data and with consideration of the impact on all components of the system.

- Accountability for advancing a shared community agenda and assessing progress toward common goals.

I have seen firsthand the benefits of an effective coordinating entity in Kent County. Over the last decade, we have brought significant additional investment to the ECE system, including funding from local and national philanthropy. We passed a ballot measure for a modest property tax increase to sustain early childhood programs and services. We have better aligned services, improving efficiencies and maximizing resources. We have identified gaps and redirected resources to historically marginalized communities and those with the most urgent needs. We have influenced state policy changes to the benefit of both families and ECE providers. We have built a diverse coalition of dedicated early childhood advocates – including employers, philanthropy, elected officials, educators in the K-12 and higher education systems, and business groups. Parents, families, and ECE providers have been central to all this work.

I am confident an ECE coordinating entity will have a similar impact in Montgomery County. A commitment to an independent and neutral entity that brings together the public and private sectors will ensure Montgomery County has an ECE system that meets the needs of all young children and families as well as employers. Early care and education is vital to the economy of today, as it allows parents to fully engage in the workforce, and tomorrow, as it is key to developing the talent pipeline by preparing young children for school and life success.

Never has the need for a strong ECE system been more apparent than during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has exposed long-standing gaps, including a lack of quality care that disproportionately disadvantages Black and Brown families, children in economically disadvantaged households, and families in under-resourced neighborhoods. The pandemic has exacerbated inequities for families as well as ECE providers, many of whom are women of color.

This is a unique opportunity for Montgomery County to pursue bold and innovative solutions. The years of research, community engagement, and thoughtful consideration that have informed this legislation position an ECE coordinating entity to have both an immediate and lasting impact on families and the entire community.

Thank you to the Montgomery County Council for your consideration of this legislation, particularly those members who have taken the lead on advancing and championing it. I urge you to vote yes in support of Bill 42-21 and appreciate the opportunity to testify.